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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MARSEILLE 000009

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SUBJECT: HEAD OF LOCAL MUSLIM COUNCIL LOOKING FORWARD TO A PRODUCTIVE
2007

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CLASSIFIED BY: PHILIP BREEDEN, CONSUL GENERAL, AMCONSUL
MARSEILLE, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Title: Head of Local Muslim Council Looking Forward to a
Productive 2007

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 23, 2007 Abderhammane Ghoul, (protect) President of the Regional Council of the Muslim Cult, Province Cote d'Azur Region (CRCM-PACA), discussed with Marseille Consul General his reasons for optimism about 2007. Major mosque projects in his region are advancing, and the former President of the CRCM-PACA has finally abandoned his blocking tactics and gone to the U.S. to pursue academic activities, allowing the Council to function normally for the first time in almost two years. However, Ghoul wishes he could spend more time on "fire prevention rather than fire fighting" as he is constantly confronted with disaffected and impatient youth from his community who are frustrated about their lack of integration in the French economy and society. Although himself notably mute on the subject, Ghoul also noted that French Muslim youth are also angry about U.S. foreign policy in Iraq and the Middle East. End Summary

¶2. (C) Mourad Zerfaoui No Longer in the Picture:
Fresh from leading around 150 local Muslims on the Hajj, Abderhammane Ghoul met with Marseille CG over lunch on January 23. He was confident about 2007, mainly because former CRCM President Mourad Zerfaoui was out of the picture. Mourad Zerfaoui, a young Algerian-born cleric and biochemist, was the first president of the CRCM, surprising everyone when he out-pollled Bachir Dahmani, the venerable Algerian-born Imam who was a city fixture and one of the co-founders of Marseille Esperance. Zerfaoui, now 39, eventually established a dialogue with the city, but refused to give up his post when Abderhammane Ghoul defeated him in the 2005 CRCM elections. For over a year Zerfaoui refused to vacate the CRCM offices provided by the city and impeded CRCM work in many other ways. This power struggle divided the CRCM and made it difficult to work together. However, Ghoul informed CG that Zerfaoui had finally accepted his defeat, and moved on - to the US, where he was pursuing academic pursuits. According to Ghoul, his departure has those who supported him scratching their heads and wondering what all the fuss was about, while those who opposed him are relieved and ready to get down to business. For his part, Ghoul, while glad Zerfaoui is out of the picture, was somewhat bemused that a person he considers to be an extremist is now in the U.S.

¶3. (U) Mosques Moving Ahead
Ghoul informed CG that the association formed to build the Great Mosque of Marseille would receive the keys for the new site from the city in March, 2007. Squatters that occupy two buildings on the site need to be removed by the city, but due to French law

this can't be done until the spring. The architect's plans are almost done, and Ghoul is seeking financial support for the renovations that are needed. According to Ghoul, the Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian governments are considering in-kind contributions rather than cash, with each country taking responsibility for something. CRCM will also soon launch a national subscription campaign. In Nice, the CRCM is considering several mosque sites proposed by the city. This is a turnaround from the city's earlier position of opposing a mosque in Nice. Saying Mayor Peyrat "had come a long way," from his days as Front National member, Ghoul was confident this project was on the right track. In Cannes, a site has also been provided by the city for a new mosque, and Ghoul has been asked if the CRCM would allow Interior Minister Sarkozy to lay the first stone during a trip he will make to the South of France in March. Given the number of wealthy Muslims from abroad who maintain residences in and around Cannes, Ghoul said financing the new mosque will be easy.

14. (U) Marseille Esperance Bis or Imitation is the Finest Flattery

Ghoul has also been solicited by Christian Estrosi, Minister of Public Works and President of the Department of the Alpes Maritime (the region around Nice), for help in setting up a version of Marseille Esperance for the Alpes Maritime Department. Marseille Esperance is a symbolic organization unique in France that was started in the early 1990's by a former Mayor of Marseille, Robert Vigoreaux. It gathers together the leaders of all the major faiths in Marseille to promote intra-religious dialogue and tolerance. It has no statutory powers but the city provides office space. While it was at the time widely questioned for the way it linked a secular institution (the municipality) with religious figures, it has shown itself to be a very useful tool for maintaining good relations amongst various faith communities and between these communities and the city. Ghoul was very pleased that another region was seeking to emulate this organization.

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15. (U) Comorians Growing in Strength

Ghoul said the Comorians are now the second largest Muslim community in Marseille, surpassing by a large margin the Tunisians and Moroccans. The Office Director for Ghoul is Comorian, and actually spends most of his time in the Comoros working for the President. (NB: The Comorians are Sunnis of the Hanafi school, whereas most Maghrebi Muslims are Sunnis from the Maliki school). Ghoul said they were committed to "making things work," and he enjoyed good relations with them.

16. (C) Youth are Angry and Impatient

Ghoul remains concerned that he spends too much time on "fire-fighting and not enough on fire prevention." According to Ghoul third-generation Muslims feel French, have no desire to leave, and want to fully exercise their rights in France. However all too often they either don't know how to work the system, or lose their patience and boil over into violence. Jobs are crucial to solving this problem of integration because, "As soon as they have a job, their behavior changes." Shaking his head, he said sometimes these younger activists confuse liberty with the "right to do anything," which leads them to do unproductive things. He gave the example of a local activist in a public meeting threatening a sub-prefect that his "people would start burning cars," if they didn't get their way. Iraq and anger about US foreign policy in the Middle East only adds to their frustration level. He said many of those he spoke with felt the manner in which Saddam Hussein was executed was a "calculated insult" to Sunnis around the world, and the ongoing impasse between Israel and Palestine weighs heavily on the community. That said, Ghoul said he enjoys excellent relations with the local Jewish community.

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